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POPULATION AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE -THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

(Not an official report or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination.)

On 28 February, 1991, Mr.Joseph Van Arendonk, Deputy Executive Director (Programme) of the United Nations Population Fund, (UNFPA), briefed NGO representatives on global issues related to population and international development assistance and the role of NGOs in this field.

Mr. Van Arendonk began by emphasising that global poverty and environmental degradation are interrelated with population growth. Understanding these interlinkages would help governments find appropriate solutions to foster sustainable and human-oriented development policies.

BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

While over-all fertility and population growth rates decreased during the 1980s, world population, which has already reached 5.3 billion in 1990, is growing faster than ever before due to a larger population base. Three babies per second, 250,000 every day and more than 95 million are added every year at the beginning of the 1990s. 95 per cent of this population growth is occurring in the developing countries. Its population has more than doubled in 35 years, increasing from 1.7 billion in 1950 to 4.1 billion in 1990. By the year 2000, it will grow to nearly five billion- out of an expected world total of 6.25 billion.

An important demographic characteristic of developing countries is the unfavourable age structure caused by high fertility rates. According to United Nations studies, in 1985 around 37 per cent of the total population in the developing world were children below the age of 15. This development adds strain on the "productive" members of society, many of whom are underemployed most of the time.

Mr. Van Arendonk continued by pointing to the problem of uneven population distribution in developing countries, fuelled in part by rapid rural to urban migration. By the year 2000, 77 per cent of Latin America's population, 41 per cent of Africa's and 35 per cent of Asia's population will be urbanized. Cities in the developing world are growing by 3.6 per cent per year. If this development continues, transport, communication, health and sanitation systems could be further overwhelmed.

Mr. Van Arendonk stressed that these imbalances in numbers, structure and distribution take place mostly in developing countries, which are least able to cope with the resource and environmental consequences, their needs for housing, education, jobs, water, sanitation and basic health services. This global "underclass" in the developing world is estimated to be at least 900 million, perhaps 1.2 billion. Even this figure may be an underestimate of the number of people living on the edge of survival.

POVERTY AND POPULATION GROWTH

Mr. Van Arendonk said that the 1980s were a time of decline, of falling food supplies, falling earnings, and rising external debt for many developing countries. By the end of the 1980s, these countries had accumulated $1.3 trillion of debt, for which they are obliged to pay about $100 billion yearly just to meet interest payments. Debt servicing consumed around 21 per cent of the export income of severly indebted low-income countries, whose ratio of public long-term debt to GNP in 1988 was 111 per cent, according to World Bank reports. Mr. Van Arendonk said that it was appaling to note that these critical resources which could have been invested in the social and economic development of these countries are now being mostly channeled to rich countries. Indeed, many countries are experiencing a reverse flow of resources totalling approximately 60 billion a year - towards financial institutions in the developed world.

Falling earnings and rising debt have created an economic crisis for many governments. A partial solution to this problem has been the adoption of "structural adjustment programmes" aiming at eliminating macro-economic inefficiencies, stimulating economic growth and facilitating the repayment of debt and accessibility to new credits. However, these structural adjustment measures have in many of the 59 countries receiving these loans been hurting the poor.

Case studies show a deterioration in general health, education and living standards in countries such as Botswana, Peru, Brazil, Korea etc. The reverse flow of resources mentioned earlier reduces the fiscal capacity of governments to meet the basic needs of their people, which also translates into less financial support for "non-productive activities", meaning social programmes, including population. Similar trends can be observed in the United States, for example, where concerns on the need to control the budget deficit have resulted in cuts for funding for social programmes.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL FACTOR IN THE POVERTY AND POPULATION EQUATION

At any level of development, increased population increases energy use, resource consumption and environmental stress. In developing countries poverty and rapid population growth force communities into unsustainable practices such as slash-and-burn agriculture which depletes forest cover and long-term productivity of tropical soils, excessive cutting-down of rain forests, overusing or misusing farmland, polluting and exhausting water supplies.

The destruction of tropical forests, estimated at 11 million hectares each year eliminates thousands of animal and plant species, an irreplacable reservoir of resources of incalculable present and future value. The poor use of land, including the non-stop cultivation of worn-out lands and poor water management mean that more than a billion hectares of range and cropland are threatened with drying into deserts, affecting the lives of an estimated 250 million people.

A key to solving many of these environmental problems is the adoption of sustainable agricultural and resource policies, including finding and utilizing renewable sources of energy and the commitment and action on the part of governments and individuals towards adopting patterns of consumption which respond to global, national and community needs. Mr. Van Arendonk emphasised that it is essential to introduce population policies aimed at slowing rapid population growth and also to balance distribution between rural and urban areas. He underlined the importance of the role women play in all these programmes, as they are functioning as resource managers - the caretakers of food, farm land, water and fuel - in the rural areas of developing countries.

PUTTING ATTENTION AND COMMITMENT TO PRIORITIES

Development planning in developing countries and development assistance on the part of multilateral and bilateral donor communities must be re-oriented regarding the priorities to pursue in light of strategies which have failed during the past three decades. The problem of poverty must be faced realistically in terms of reforming and changing institutions which discriminate against the poor. Policies and actions related to land reform, basic needs strategies, education, productivity incentives to the poor,corruption, the protection of human rights, democratization, non-aggression and non-militarism, and popular participation in decision making must be vigorously pursued.

Mr. Van Arendonk said that to alleviate poverty, profound changes must accompany the way international resources are allocated for development. First, governments and financial institutions of developed countries should deal squarely with the issue of foreign debt, recognizing that either a partial or full absolution of such debts may be the only way to reverse the net outflow of resources from rich to poor. Second, the share of official development assistance (ODA) of developed countries should increase considerably. An increase of around four to five per cent of ODA going to population activities would meet greater resources requirements and would in the long-run result to greater pay-offs and benefits. Third, a re-orientation of the spending priorities of developed countries is necessary so that the billions spent anually on armaments should be unleashed towards meeting basic social needs, particularly to alleviate hunger, disease and poverty.

RESOURCES NEEDED FOR POPULATION IN THE 1990s

Mr. Van Arendonk said that $nine billion by the year 2000 would be needed to meet policy objectives towards achieving a balance between population growth and resource utilization. If governments and international agencies give top priority to the population issue, Mr Van Arendonk said, funding on such a level could be achieved. Commitment on the part of governments is of utmost priority in this field.

A GROWING ROLE FOR NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

NGOs have played and should continue to play pioneering roles in promoting and raising awareness of population issues and in supporting innovative development projects, especially those which integrate population, environment and poverty concerns. In view of the continued sensitivities which plague population issues, the need to involve grassroots level has never been greater. The role of NGOs in sensitizing governments and development organizations to population and environmental considerations of projects have also been significant.

Mr. Van Arendonk concluded by saying that to encourage the full participation of national and international NGOs in on-ground population programmes is to facilitate more international networking between population-oriented NGOs and community groups. We should all aspire that poverty is forever eradicated as a permanent human condition in this world.